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## ABSTRACT

The National Environmental Education Act became law on November 16, 1990. The major sections of this law establish a national environmental education office, an environmental education and training program, environmental education grants, environmental internships and fellowships, environmental education awards, and an environmental education advisory council and task force. In 1996, reauthorization of the Act died in committee in the House of Representatives. Proponents of the Act at the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF) expect reintroduction in 1997. When reintroduced, the Act is expected to be handled by the House Education and Workforce Committee. Proponents of the Act believe many members of this committee should be better informed about the positive role environmental education plays in improving education in general by promoting active learning. This paper describes accomplishments of the Act in its first 6 years and suggests ways to address deficiencies that provide greater focus for environmental education on the state level. These include: (1) emphasizing the central role of the United States in environmental education rather than the tacit use of United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) regional offices; and (2) encouraging state experts to characterize state-specific environmental knowledge levels in on-line digests. (PVD)

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# **Bringing Sharper Focus to Environmental Education at the State Level in the Reauthorization of the National Environmental Education Act**

**by  
Guy N. Lefebvre**

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Bringing sharper focus to environmental education  
at the state level in the reauthorization of the  
National Environmental Education Act

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AERA Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, March 28, 1997

The National Environmental Education Act (1990, Public Law 101-619) was first signed into law by President Bush on November 16, 1990. In July, 1996, the Act was introduced for reauthorization by Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) and Representative Scott Klug (R-WI). The reauthorization of the Act passed the Senate on a voice vote in the summer of 1996, but died in committee in the House in the autumn of 1996 at the end of the 104th Congress. The Act has not been reintroduced in the first quarter of 1997 by the 105th Congress. Proponents of the Act at the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation expect reintroduction in the summer of 1997. Due to the outcome in the last Congress, the Senate would like the House of Representatives to take the first significant reauthorization actions in this Congress. When introduced in the House, the Act is expected to be handled by the House Education and Workforce Committee chaired by Representative William Goodling (R-PA). Proponents of the Act believe many members of this committee need to be better informed about the positive role environmental education often contributes toward improving education generally by promoting active learning. The Act was funded by Congress at the \$7.8 million dollar level in fiscal years 1994, 1995, and 1997. In fiscal year 1996, only \$5.6 million was appropriated. President Clinton's 1998 budget calls for maintaining funding at the \$7.8 million level.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) rather than the United States Department of Education (USDE) administers the Act. The major sections of the Act establish: (a) a national environmental education office, (b) an environmental education and training program, (c) environmental education grants, (d) environmental internships and fellowships, (e) environmental education awards, and (f) an environmental education advisory council and task force. These efforts have all been laudable, but the occasion of the Act's reauthorization is a time to reflect on what new ideas might be attempted. In the 104th Congress, only very minor changes were proposed such as expanding the number of members on the National Advisory Council and giving the USEPA slightly more latitude in the environmental education grants program.

The country's founders did not include education as a charge of the federal government in the Constitution, and thereby left primary jurisdiction for education with the states. As a result, state constitutions contain provisions assuming responsibility for public education. States are the level of government addressing inequities between poor urban and rural districts and more affluent suburban districts. In cases where local governments have literal breakdowns of their school systems, state governments are called upon to provide assistance and restoration. In 1995, states provided \$129 billion in revenues for public elementary and secondary education whereas local governments provided \$123 billion and the federal government provided \$19 billion (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1996, Table

234). Despite the states having primary jurisdiction and being the largest revenue providers, the federal government does have a role in education. The USDE has a budget of approximately \$30 billion per year. Monies for all levels of education by all departments and agencies of the federal government approach \$75 billion per year (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1996, Table 260). The National Environmental Education Act is thus a very small program with funding at the \$7.8 million dollar level operating outside of the USDE jurisdiction and budget.

In its first six years, one principal way the Act was used has been to fund the ten USEPA regional offices with one full time environmental education professional who has been responsible for administering the environmental education grants program in each of the ten regions. The USEPA annually publishes guidelines for these grants in the *Federal Register* (for most recent, see Dec. 10, 1996), and the USEPA regional offices award grants to states, local schools, teachers, and non-profit organizations. Larger grants with national scope are also awarded directly from the USEPA's Environmental Education office in Washington, D.C. Grants from the program are in high demand resulting in less than twenty percent of proposals being funded. The grants program has fostered diversity in environmental education, and is worthy of being continued in the Act's reauthorization with greater flexibility in funding formulas. However, the approach of giving grants from the ten federal regions to a small percentage of the applicants who are ready, willing and able to produce good projects does not crystallize environmental education efforts at the state level. To address this deficiency, the Act's reauthorization should consider adding provisions that provide greater focus for environmental education on the state level. In the current legislation, state agencies are simply mentioned among a long list of entities that ought be included in environmental education efforts.

One program is being funded under the current Act that is seeking to build better state level environmental education delivery systems. This program is the National Environmental Education Advancement Project (NEEAP) which is administered at the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point by Dr. Richard Wilke and Ms. Abby Ruskey. NEEAP has articulated a three part model - program, structure, and funding - that contains sixteen subcomponents (Ruskey & Wilke, 1994). NEEAP is seeking to foster adoption of the model tailored to each state's individual circumstances in twenty states by the year 2000. Environmental education would be much enhanced if resources were provided to assist with implementing the NEEAP model in all fifty states in the near term future.

What might be other approaches to enhancing environmental education on the state level? An obvious, but often overlooked factor, is that efforts to improve the environment and avoid degradation is a learning enterprise. Elected officials, regulators, developers, teachers, students, and the citizenry at large do not fully know and will likely never completely know the complex outcomes of the myriad of efforts made for and against the environment. Given that much environmental knowledge is highly uncertain with a significant learning curve, if each state had a mechanism to regularly feature the knowledge of environmental

professionals in their states to make ongoing assessments of particular environmental issues in their states, these assessments could go far to enhance the knowledge base for environmental education at the state level.

Each state funds at least one public university that has biologists, chemists, and other natural and social scientists capable of formulating new valid and reliable perspectives on the environment. Each state also has many non-academic professionals who address environmental concerns and projects. Medical doctors treat environmental health problems. Engineers design projects for the business community. Attorneys both regulate to protect the environment and advocate to allow economic development to move forward meeting the complexity of environmental regulations. Thus, in regard to updating environmental knowledge, the Act could provide funds to create annual or biannual state environmental digests with contributors from the academic disciplines and the professions in each state that are specifically aimed at providing an updated knowledge base for environmental education. These digests could primarily be published for distribution to schools on the internet. Each state would thus achieve better focus for its environmental education efforts by having an integrated scope of the current environmental realities in its state produced by experts from the state.

On the skill level, the Act should consider having each state's environmental education community address the learning of creativity and problem solving methods in relation to its environmental education efforts. A great many approaches exist to problem solving, however, one program developed at Buffalo State University, Creative Problem Solving (CPS) stands out (Isaksen, Dorval and Treffinger, 1994). CPS researchers have tested a range of methods to determine: a. current realities which they term "data-finding", b. goals which they term "mess-finding", and c. the gaps between current realities and goals which they term "problem-finding." Once these methods are used to understand a problem, other tested methods are recommended to generate unique ideas and to formulate action plans. Having the Act enable each state to bring creative problem solving skill sets to educators and learners would prepare the next generation to meet the challenges posed by the need for continual learning about environmental issues as they unfold.

In December, 1996, the USDE's Office of Educational Research and Improvement released *Building Knowledge for a Nation of Learners: A Framework for Education Research 1997* (Robinson, 1996). This report sets national priorities for research in education in seven domains: (a) early childhood preparation for school, (b) curricula improvement to include creativity and problem solving abilities, (c) teacher preparation and professional development, (d) active learning strategies for middle and high schools, (e) effective preparation of diverse populations, (f) school, parent, and community relations, and (g) the changing requirements of adult competence. Environmental education can play a vital role to foster these articulated educational research domains. However, because the Act is administered by USEPA, and not by USDE, and because at the state level the environmental management and regulatory departments are often called upon to address environmental education rather than state departments of education, environmental

education in the nation would benefit by the Congress clearly stating in the reauthorized Act that both the USDE and state educational agencies ought assume a greater responsibility for environmental education in partnership with the USEPA and state environmental agencies. Wedding this Congressional *educational focus* intent in the reauthorized Act to the USDE's educational research goals could thus be used to argue that environmental education will serve a key role in achieving educational reform in the nation by being an important vehicle in furthering the many dimensions of active learning.

The reauthorized Act must pass muster with the Republican controlled House Education and Workforce Committee. Having the reauthorized Act: (a) emphasize the central environmental educational role of the states rather than the tacit use of USEPA regional offices, (b) encourage experts in the states to characterize state specific environmental knowledge levels in on-line digests, and (c) cite the role environmental education can play to promote active learning and creative problem solving skill sets to foster meaningful educational reform, provides a body of argument that might not only appeal to skeptical Republican members of the House of Representatives, but might also even make the case for a slight increase in the Act's funding level to twelve million dollars by the Senate and House Appropriations Committees which the original 1990 Act envisioned.

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U.S. EPA  
Environmental Education Division (1707)  
October 1996

# **NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION ACT OF 1990**

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On November 16, 1990, the National Environmental Education Act (P.L. 101-619) was signed into law. The goal of the Act is to increase public understanding of the environment and to advance and develop environmental education and training. It provides for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to play a leadership role among Federal agencies in implementing the new law and builds upon long-standing efforts undertaken by local education institutions, state agencies, not-for-profit educational and environmental organizations, federal agencies, and the private sector.

The mandates and authorizations under the Act are as follows:

## **Section 1 -- Title -- National Environmental Education Act**

### **Section 2 -- Findings**

Includes Congressional finding that environmental problems present a significant threat to human health and environmental quality and that current Federal efforts to educate the public and train a professional work force about environmental problems and effective responses are not adequate. States it is the policy of the U.S. to establish and support a program of education on the environment.

### **Section 3 -- Definitions**

Includes various definitions for terms used in the Act.

### **Section 4 -- Office of Environmental Education**

Requires the establishment of an office of environmental education at EPA. The staff shall be headed by a Director who is a member of the Senior Executive Service and shall include a headquarters staff of not less than six and not more than ten full-time equivalent employees. The regional support shall include one full-time equivalent employee per region.

### **Section 5 -- Environmental Education and Training Program**

Requires the establishment and operation of an Environmental Education and Training Program. On an annual basis, the Administrator shall award a grant or cooperative agreement to an institution of higher education or a not-for-profit institution or a consortia of such institutions to establish and operate an environmental education and training program. Purpose is to train education professionals to develop and deliver environmental education programs. Requires the program to include teacher and education professional exchanges between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

## **Section 6 -- Environmental Education Grants**

Authorizes EPA to award grants to education institutions, state and local agencies, and non-profit organizations to support environmental education projects. Requires publication of regulations addressing solicitation, selection, and supervision of projects as well as evaluation and dissemination of results of projects. Grants may not exceed \$250,000. Twenty five percent of grant dollars shall be awarded as grants of \$5,000 or less. Authorizes grants that foster international cooperation between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

## **Section 7 -- Internships and Fellowships**

Requires EPA to facilitate internships for college students and fellowships for in-service teachers with agencies of the Federal government. To the extent practicable, there shall be 250 internships and 50 fellowships per year.

## **Section 8 -- Awards Programs**

Requires EPA to provide for national awards recognizing outstanding contributions to environmental education. Awards shall be given to commemorate Theodore Roosevelt, Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, and Gifford Pinchot. Also authorizes "President's Environmental Youth Awards" recognizing young people (K-12) for outstanding local environmental awareness projects.

## **Section 9 -- Federal Task Force and National Advisory Council**

Requires the establishment of a Federal Task Force and a National Environmental Education Advisory Council to advise, consult with, and make recommendations to the Administrator on EPA's implementation of the Act. The Federal Task Force shall include members from various Federal agencies under the leadership of EPA. The National Advisory Council shall be comprised of 11 members who represent primary and secondary education, colleges and universities, not-for-profit organizations, State agencies, business and industry, and senior Americans.

## **Section 10 -- National Environmental Education and Training Foundation**

Requires the establishment of a National Environmental Education and Training Foundation that will encourage private gifts for the benefit of the environmental education activities of EPA; participate with foreign governments furthering environmental education and training worldwide; and further the development of environmental awareness.

## **Section 11 -- Authorization of Funds**

Authorizes funds to implement the Act as follows: \$12 million in FY 1992; \$12 million in FY 1993; \$13 million in FY 1994; \$14 million in FY 1995; and \$14 million in FY 1996. NOTE: Congress actually appropriated less than was originally authorized under the Act as follows: \$6.5 million in FY 1992; \$7.2 million in FY 1993; \$7.8 million in FY 1994; \$7.8 million in FY 1995; and \$5.6 million in FY 1996.

For more information, contact the EPA Environmental Education Division at 202-260-4965.





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